CLAIMED AND CALLED
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Psalm 71:1–6
Luke 4:21–30

"Is not this Joseph's son?"
Luke 4:22 (NRSV)

First sermons preached in one's home church can be precarious affairs. How well I remember it. Newly graduated and ordained as a Presbyterian minister, I was invited to preach to the congregation into which I had been baptized twenty-five years earlier and in which I had grown up. I remember them well. Mrs. Shields, who made me leave the Junior High Sunday School class, threw me out, actually, because I wouldn't stop kicking Patsy McKinstry beneath the table. Irene Saucerman and Magdelein Bair, two high school teachers who always sat together and because I was in their classes eyed me warily, suspiciously, I thought, from their back pew on Sunday morning. I was sure they were comparing notes on my behavior and performance—and I wasn't getting a very good evaluation. Miss Bair told me I talked too fast: every time I saw her she said, "Slow down." A coach was there, a YMCA leader, a youth advisor—all of whom knew far too much about me for comfort. Family was there too: grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins who were members of other churches and took the morning off and came to our church for the grand occasion. Even old high school friends who didn't go to church at all and could not believe that I was actually an ordained minister showed up to see what would happen. My father "marked off," which means he called the crew dispatcher at the Pennsylvania Railroad and announced that he wasn't available to be called to work—an almost unheard-of development in our home—because his son was preaching.

It was an altogether precarious occasion.

We all made it through the ordeal, more or less. I don't think anybody was converted that morning. The church survived the experience. My father gently critiqued my sermon afterward by suggesting that I was far too academic and not nearly personal enough. And sure enough, Miss Bair shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "You're still talking too fast. Slow down." A precarious occasion.

And so it was that Jesus came home to Nazareth one time. Ever since the day he walked into the Jordan River and was baptized by his cousin John, he had been in Galilee, miles away, and the word had come back to his hometown that he was traveling around Galilee, from village to village, teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick; that he had a group of followers, disciples, with him; and that large crowds were attracted to him. His reputation preceded him when he came home to Nazareth that day and on the sabbath went to the synagogue—the synagogue where he had grown up, where he had attended weekly on the sabbath and occasionally during the week for prayers; the place where he, with other young boys his age, learned to read and write Hebrew and perhaps made life difficult for some patient, nameless rabbi trying to teach young boys; the synagogue where everybody knew him: Joseph's son, Mary's son.

So the elders invited him to read scripture, a text of his own choosing, and to comment. He chose a favorite passage from Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .;
> he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
> release to the captives, sight to the blind,
> freedom to the oppressed."

They loved that passage. They read themselves into it. They were the poor, oppressed, captives. Rome was the oppressor. They waited in eager anticipation for the day a savior, a liberator, would come to rally the nation, throw out the occupiers, and establish the integrity and freedom of their people, their nation, once again. He picked a good passage, but he began to get into trouble when he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What in the world was that about? Surely he doesn't mean it—that the Spirit of the Lord is upon *him*, that he is the liberator, the savior. They overlooked it, gave him a pass for youthful enthusiasm and hyperbole. "He's not the savior; he's just Joseph's son, little Jesus. We knew him when . . ." It's always precarious to preach in your home church.

Jesus should have stopped right there, left them wondering what in the world he had meant with that "Today, this scripture is fulfilled" business, enjoyed their pride and affection, and gone home for lunch with his family.

Instead the story takes a dangerous turn. He pushed on and told two odd little stories, reminded them actually of stories they knew, and both of them are about outsiders, non-Israelites, non-Jews, outsiders, receiving the grace of God. He had read his old neighbors accurately. If they were sure of anything, it was that they were God's chosen, God's elect. They were in, and everyone else was not. So why in the world is he telling stories about a

Syrian army officer and a poor pagan woman, if it is not to say a word about the sovereign grace of God, which God extends to all people, not just one people, one race, or religion for that matter, and a critique aimed at them, his old friends and neighbors, for missing the point and becoming too narrow, too rigid, too exclusive?

It's one thing to welcome a young man home and listen respectfully as he reads and speaks. It's another thing altogether when he criticizes his old friends, challenges their assumptions and the comfortable conventions by which they assure themselves that they are in and everybody else is out. That, incredibly, turns a friendly congregation into a lynch mob. They unceremoniously kick him out of town and almost throw him over a cliff on the way out.

Your first sermon in your home church can be precarious indeed.

The first point here—and I think we have as much difficulty with it as they did, by the way—is the sovereign grace of God, which is not confined to one people, one religion even, one set of creedal or theological affirmations within one religion even. It seems to be the nature of religion and religious people to become exclusive and to build barriers to protect the insiders and keep out the others. Shiite Muslims can't wait to get their hands on political power in Iraq, presumably so they can enforce their brand of Islam on the Sunni Muslims who oppressed and persecuted and excluded them for the past forty years. We Christians can parse it just as finely. Condemning one another to hell, excommunicating and excluding and persecuting, reading one another out of the kingdom because of our disagreements on this and that.

But one of the most consistent motifs in the biblical story from beginning to end—and one of the strongest themes of Jesus' ministry—is the message of God's love and saving grace, which comes to and claims all people, not just a few favorites. It is a clear message of Jesus', starting that day in the Nazareth synagogue when he challenged the theological provincialism of his old neighbors and continuing right through to the end as he persists in proclaiming and demonstrating God's welcoming grace to the unclean, the marginalized, the shut out—precisely those people his religion excluded. Jesus' main concern is not who we're letting in, who we're ordaining, but who is being left out, excluded.

The gospel of Jesus Christ challenges the comfortable status quo, challenges particularly our use of religion to shut others out. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about a grace and love that knows no boundaries and is for everyone. That is not good news to those who regard God's grace and mercy and salvation as their private possession. The preacher needs to know that, but so do all of us.

There is a word here, as well, about God's claim on our lives and God's call to commitment. You might say that Jesus' troubles started that day when he read the ancient words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" but also his vocation, his life's work. Earlier we read together from Psalm 71: "You, O Lord, are my hope. . . . Upon you have I leaned from my birth: it was you who took me from my mother's womb." It is a consistent and sometimes disconcerting idea: God knows us. God has plans for us. God claims us and calls us. Some people do what they do with such grace and integrity and excellence that we say about them, "He was born for this; she was created to do this." Who they are and what they do are a perfect and complete unity. Pinchas Zuckerman playing the violin and conducting the Chicago Symphony, Kerry Wood throwing a fastball, Diane Keaton portraying a Manhattan editor—perfection.

But the biblical idea—and it sounds strange to modern ears—is that God has something for each of us, an important role to play in God's kingdom, which, in a mysterious way, is our own personal fulfillment. Some of us can earn our living at it. Others of us must earn a living in order to be and do what God calls us to be and do. For each of us, it is to live for God and God's kingdom on earth. For each of us, regardless of how we earn our living, it is to attend to God's agenda, about which there is no mystery at all: peace, justice, compassion, and God's gracious welcome extended to all.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus said, and we believe it is true for each and every one of us. No one is excluded. No one lives outside the gracious claim and call of God: preacher, lawyer, nurse and physical therapist, mother and grandmother, artist and athlete, politician and police officer.

The invitation to all of us is to know that about ourselves—God's claim on our lives, God's call—and then to commit ourselves to it.

I've been thinking about one of my heroes lately: William Sloane Coffin Jr. More radical on many of the important issues of our day than I ever was, Coffin—former chaplain at Yale and minister of Riverside Church in Manhattan, civil rights and peace advocate, concert pianist, powerful preacher—has been a prophet, challenging the status quo, uncompromisingly honest about his faith. It's gotten him in trouble and, on occasion, in jail. Even when he has made me uncomfortable, he has made me think. He's not well now.

There's a wonderful new collection of his thoughts that I've been enjoying. The text this morning led me to wonder about how Coffin, who was well connected and well educated, a concert pianist and brilliant student, who could have written his own ticket in law or business or politics, made his

vocational decision. I pulled his autobiography from the shelf and read about his service as an intelligence officer during World War II; his intellectual and spiritual struggles with the big philosophic issues of the meaning and purpose of life at the dawn of the nuclear age; his exposure to the thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr and his difficult, almost reluctant decision to enter seminary.

He was sitting in a memorial service for a friend who had been killed in an automobile accident, was fuming at God for the injustice of life, arguing with God, and then the organist played one of the great Bach chorale preludes: "Christus Stand in Todes Band" ("Christ stands in the bonds of death"). He remembers:

> It was genuinely comforting. And it made me think that religious truths, like those of music, were probably apprehended on a deeper level than they were ever comprehended. The leap of faith was not a leap of thought after all. The leap of faith was really a leap of action. Faith was not believing without proof; it was trusting without reservation.
> (*Once to Every Man*, p. 83)

The leap of faith is not a leap of thought, but a leap of action.

God's call is a mystery. None of us should claim too much. But the witness of scripture and church down across the centuries is that God claims each one of us, calls each one of us to discipleship and commitment, promises to give us the gifts we need to be faithful and promises to keep us forever.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us all.

Thanks be to God.